

GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS IN THE MAKING : BUILDING A NATIONAL AND LOCAL FRAMEWORK FOR GIS IN LAO PDR

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Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is undergoing rapid changes in terms of economic policy (such as increasing foreign direct investment, integration into ASEAN and preparing future membership to World Trade Organization) but remains a geographically locked-in country which means that traded products have to overcome large distances to large harbours and trading centers. Therefore a competitive strategy based on low costs cannot be developed for most products. Surrounded by such competitors as China, Thailand and Vietnam, it is important for Laos to develop an export strategy based on non-price factors such as quality and originality of its products. This sets the ground for the Lao government's interest in establishing an institutional framework and some pioneer pilot projects in the area of Geographical indications, materialized in 2007 by the creation of the Project for Establishment of Geographical Indications in Laos (PEIG) .

Observed and expected effects of geographical indications on rural development rural are indeed manifold. Five main processes have been identified (Sautier and Chapados 2008). In the first place, recognition of the fact that the GI product is different from the average mass production provides a potentially sustainable differentiation for the product and a unique position on the market as compared to its competitors. Second, GIs rely on an agreement on good production and processing practices; the codification of production and/or processing procedures tends to increase production regularity and market linkage stability. Third, as other quality schemes GI stimulate a stronger coordination and collective efficiency within the supply chain. Fourth, geographical indications have an effect on local stakeholders' self-esteem, learning processes and on the enhancements of their capabilities of. Last but not least, GIs involve a valorisation of natural and/or cultural heritage, which may generate externalities on related domains such as tourism and biodiversity conservation.

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While the importance of preparing a national institutional and legal framework for the awareness, application, examination, registration and publication of geographical indications should not be overlooked, this area is generally sufficiently well covered by documentation. For this reason, this paper focuses on the definition and prioritization process for pilot products, which constitutes the second essential component of a sound emerging GI process. It presents the grounds and main methodological guidelines adopted by PEIG project in order to carry out the initial phase of feasibility study for potential Lao geographical indication products, culminating in the organization of the selection process for the pilot products elected for the implementation phase.

The rationale of the feasibility study framework encompasses several dimensions. It involves a reflexion on the name, the type and the stage of product to be protected, the essential end-product characteristics, the critical steps within the production and processing itineraries, the geographical area of production and elaboration, the history of the product and of the use of the name, the reputation, the analysis of the market organization and marketing channels (considering both supply side and demand side), an assessment of the link between the product and the area, and the identification of the stakeholders or potential applicant group. Each of these topics are commented and justified.

Regarding the selection criteria for the choice of pilot products, a pragmatic y simplified grid was elaborated the national committee which proved operational while based on only five items: the specificity and originality of the geographical product; the presence of producers' organisations ; market demand ; a geographical concentration of production ; and a sufficient production volume. All these items are discussed by the paper.

The concluding remarks come back to the case of Laos, which shows that Geographical indications are definitely not desvinculated from the globalization process. On the contrary, they seem to constitute one of the pathways to insertion in international markets through the recognition of specific biological or cultural / knowledge assets. In other words, as previously advocated by Porter, the more global the markets, the more important and strategic are the identity attributes of the products and the relational quality of the producers and suppliers.